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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gender order that operates in rural areas of Australia, ensuring that women are accorded secondary status, that their contributions are discounted, and that their concerns are trivialized. Women are disadvantaged by patriarchal gender relations that dominate rural society and that are reinforced by ideologies of family and "wifehood" holding women accountable for domestic household labor. Interviews with 64 farm women in New South Wales revealed the large economic contributions of farm women in the areas of unpaid domestic work, unpaid farm labor, volunteer work in rural communities and schools, and paid off-farm employment. Yet, these extensive contributions are often negated, depicted as merely "helping out." Women are also seriously affected by the fact that rural society is disintegrating in many areas. Rural communities are becoming depopulated, rural services are closing, employment opportunities are contracting, and the standard of living is reduced. In such an environment, there is great pressure on women to work harder in all areas of their lives. Major issues and concerns for rural women include the scarcity of employment opportunities, lack of child care, loss of health care services and other community services, stresses on mental and physical health, need for increased access to continuing education, worries about the use of chemicals in agriculture, and inadequacy of the social security system for farm families. A number of strategies are suggested to address the concerns of rural women. (SV)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF RURAL WOMEN

Margaret Alston — Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gender order which operates in rural areas and which ensures that women are accorded a secondary status, that their contributions are discounted and that their concerns are trivialised. It addresses the largely unacknowledged efforts of farm women which aid an enhanced quality of life for their families and their communities. The paper then focuses on issues of concern to these women. In particular, the lack of employment opportunities, lack of child care, health problems, lack of services, disquiet about chemicals in agriculture and the assets test provisions on pensions. The paper is informed by a study of farm women undertaken in southern New South Wales in 1991.

When asked how she felt about her life in rural Australia, seventy-two year old Jean looked reflectively into the distance before replying 'Well all I can say is its a man's world and any woman who thinks it isn't is a pickled onion!' (Alston, 1993). Rural Australia is experienced by many women as man's country. It is a place where farm women like Jean are largely invisible in the public arena and where their opinions are overlooked and often ignored. This paper will examine the structural imperatives which operate in rural society to discount women and their contributions and to silence their concerns about many issues which impact on their lives. It will then address some of these issues and look at ways of overcoming some of the difficulties confronting women. The paper is informed by a study of farm women conducted in 1991 (Alston, 1993).

Women are disadvantaged by patriarchal gender relations which dominate rural society and which are reinforced by ideologies of family and 'wifehood' which see women as domestically focussed and which hold women accountable for domestic household labour (Whatmore, 1991). These ideologies act to legitimise patriarchal relations and the subordinate position of women within those relationships. While hierarchical gender relations are dominant in rural society generally, within farming families they are aided by the system of patrilineal inheritance which operates to ensure that men own and control the resources of agriculture and that women are sidelined in farming family systems. The most common point of entry to agriculture for women is through marriage. Because their husbands are often involved in inter- and intra-generational partnerships with kin, women marrying in to farm families may hold an inferior position and be treated with suspicion by extended family members for much of their married lives. Yet farm women are taking a great deal of responsibility ensuring that their families, their farms and their communities function effectively. They take on the lion's share of the unpaid work within their families, they are replacing hired labour on farms as conditions in agriculture deteriorate, they are moving off the farm to take on paid work in their communities to gain much needed income. As well, they are giving time to their communities to ensure an enhanced quality of life for rural dwellers (Alston, 1993). Yet their position is ill-defined, undervalued and often trivialised because what they do is seen as 'women's work' or as a role 'intrinsic to their gender identity' (Whatmore, 1991: 103).

The gender divisions in rural society which ensure a secondary role for women are endorsed by rural media. Macklin (1993) reports on a study she undertook in an Australian rural town she calls 'Garralong'. During a twenty-seven month period from 1989 to 1991 she carefully examined the local newspaper. She found that women are almost always presented in traditional roles and any other work they do is trivialised. They are seen as peripheral to important events, their voluntary work is overlooked and their dependent status ('supermum', 'Barry's wife') is endorsed. The media plays a significant part in shaping public perceptions about the position of women in rural society.

Farm women report that, despite their legal status, their position in rural society is devalued by community members such as bank managers, accountants and stock and station agents with whom they come in contact. Beverley, a fifty-three year old farming partner in southern New South Wales described the treatment she receives from professionals off the farm:

> 'I have trained them that they will be happy to do business with me as I am the person who is answering the phone ... I have had to be assertive especially with the accountant and perhaps two others, but especially the accountant who was initially not prepared to be dealing with the female partner of the farm' (Alston, 1993).

Public positions of power in rural areas, such as local government representation, are predominantly held by men. Women are often excluded from public arenas of power because they are not perceived as serious contenders and because their responsibility for unpaid family work leaves them little time to pursue their ambitions. Kerry, a thirty-five year old farm woman, who shares the farm work on their grazing farm with her husband, but finds herself '99%' responsible for unpaid family work, would like to be more involved in agri-politics. However, she finds her extensive duties make this impossible.

> 'I think if you are running a stud as well as you can, most guys don't get on those boards until they have got sons who are then looking after the stud. If you are doing all you can at home you have got no time to be on boards and things. You are tired. But of course I am doing the kids as well. Maybe if I was a man and just doing what I am doing so that I didn't have to do the kids and the house I might feel quite differently. In fact, I think I probably would feel differently. But my involvement with the kids and the necessary things you have got to do in the house even if you don't want to just keep me too busy.'

Within agriculture, women are obvious by their absence from positions of authority within traditional farm organisations. In fact, only 12.5% of women report being active in agri-politics (Alston, 1993). As a result of their lack of public power, women have little influence over decisions which influence their communities and their industry.

The secondary position of rural women is ensured by ideologies which inferiorise them, by their responsibility for unpaid family work, by their lack of control of resources, by their lack of public power and by rural media which act to trivialise their interests. As a result of their invisibility, their contributions to rural communities are overlooked. Yet, women contribute enormous amounts of

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time and energy to their families, their enterprises and their communities. In 1991 I interviewed sixty-four farm women in southern New South Wales at length about their lives and concerns. It is evident from this research that women are making a huge economic commitment to ensuring the survival of family farming and the continuance of their communities.

THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF FARM WOMEN

Unpaid Family Work

In all but one of the cases investigated, women report being almost totally responsible for household work regardless of their work off the farm, their farm work, their age, the size of their holding, the number of children or any other variable. The assignment of domestic labour to women because of their sex is a blanket occurrence in rural areas. The powerlessness of women and the structural arrangements that ensure their inferior position ensure that this will go unchallenged. Yet, for many farm women, their domestic labour includes many tasks which preserve income. Apart from the washing, ironing, cleaning and shopping, many grow vegetables, preserve food, rear young animals, make clothes for the family, and provide meals for workers (usually shearers who work on the farm for short periods each year). Many isolated women also teach their children because they are too isolated to attend school. The unchallenged assignment of domestic labour to women means that all other work they do is added to an already substantial load. Yet the results of my research suggest that many younger women are grudging in their acceptance of the traditional sexual division of labour, particularly when they are also replacing hired labour on the farm and working off the farm as well. Vicky, a farm woman in her fifties put it this way.

> 'Yes, there is only my husband and I at home, but I am totally responsible even if I have been out helping in the yards all morning and come home. I find that they sit down and watch while I get the lunch...I am used to it now, I think it is unnecessary, but I think, you know, it is an inbuilt thing in men – they just allocate you that as being your priority, and sometimes they make little concessions but mainly that's your field... they forget you are tired too, that you've been out all morning.'

Many women report similar feelings of frustration and anger. While older women tend to be more traditional in their outlook, the younger women, taking on many disparate roles, are far more likely to question the expectations of their partners.

Community Work

The nuturing role of women extends beyond the immediate sphere of the family. Women are heavily involved in keeping rural communities functioning. In fact, without their efforts many services in small Australian communities would be threatened. In my study I found that 55% of farm women were involved in more than four community organisations. These usually related to education, aged care, charitable works and sporting organisations. The efforts of women supplement or facilitate existing services. Further, their efforts in ensuring such services as Meals on Wheels helps keep older people in their homes. Within the schools, women work in the tuckshop, help in the classrooms, provide transport for excursions, clean, sew and cook for functions and attend meetings. Many women give time and effort to facilitate the sporting and leisure pursuits of men and children. Several women report they are on the executive of the local football club or are a member of the football club Ladies Auxiliary or work in the kiosk for sporting events. This facilitation of the leisure of others is not reciprocated and many women had curtailed their own leisure activities as a result of time and income constraints.

Farm Work

For farm women, their work is extended by their commitments to farming. Because of the downturn in commodity prices in agriculture many farms are doing without hired labour. The workload is being redistributed among family members. For women, this has meant they are doing more of the physical labour associated with farming. The amount of labour they perform on the farm is dependent on their legal status within the enterprise and their availability. For example, women whose husbands are involved in extended family arrangements, may not be doing much farm work at all, while those in partnership with their husbands are doing a great deal. However, their work is also dependent on their availability. The trend for women to work off the farm means they may not be readily available. Some families structure their farm work to fit in with the off-farm commitments of women. Sharon described her juggling act this way.

> 'The times I worked full-time I made sure it was never harvest time or cropping time ... and my one day at school, I suppose there were times when you would have to juggle around a little bit ... there were times I suppose that some of the [farm] jobs had to be thought about before the day or juggled around a bit.'

When women do work on the farm an interesting gendered division of tasks has developed such that women do the less significant tasks and men the more critical. Consequently, although 45% of women report that they drive machinery, many state that they plough but do not sow, they rake hay but do not bale, and few will spray or drive the header. Women are, however, very much involved in the livestock tasks. While 90% report being involved in some way, 47% state that this is a significant part of their workload.

Bookkeeping and 'go-fering' are predominantly female tasks on farms. In fact, 64% of women interviewed are responsible for the books and this is directly related to their significantly higher education in relation to their husbands. Eighty-three per cent of women in the study report that they have educational qualifications equal to or greater than their husbands. Yet, despite their higher education, their involvement in farm tasks and their efforts in other areas, only 13% of women report they have some level of involvement in the farm decision-making process.

Off-Farm Work

As well as their unpaid work in the household, in the community and on farms, rural women are moving into the paid workforce in large numbers. In fact, the movement of farm family members into the paid work force is an accelerating trend in rural areas. Because the volatility of the marketplace has seen a serious downturn in farm incomes, one of the more common strategies adopted by farm families is the taking of off-farm work to secure income. In my study, 43% of men and 50% of women were working off the farm in some capacity. Yet, women note that because of a lack of satisfying employment, they often work in insecure jobs which are mostly part-time and for which they are over qualified. Of those who were working, 77% stated that their income was spent entirely on household expenses.

Identified Problems

The economic contributions of women in rural areas can be seen from this study to be extensive. Yet, the gendered nature of rural life has acted to negate these efforts of women. This lack of acknowledgement arises from a lack of attention to anything done by women beyond the private sphere of the family. Any work outside the family is often seen as merely 'helping out' and not as independent effort. Further, as a result of their secondary status, the problems they encounter in their daily lives are often overlooked. Yet, women report that the changes in rural society are having a direct and often deleterious effect on themselves and their families.

In fact, rural society is disintegrating as many areas are becoming depopulated. Rural services are closing, employment opportunities are contracting and the standard of living is reduced. Domestic violence is increasing in rural areas and rural suicide rates, particularly among young males, are alarmingly high. Farming families, whose incomes from agriculture are precarious, suffer serious lifestyle constraints. For family members there is increasing pressure to work harder in all areas of their lives both on the farm and off. In fact, broadacre farming incomes have been negative for eight of the last sixteen years (ABARE Farm Surveys Report, 1992). In my own research, 33% of women reported that spiralling costs and decreasing returns have resulted in no money coming into the household from the farm enterprise. Many families are, in fact, relying on their off-farm work and on the Family Allowance and the Family Allowance Supplement to survive. In such conditions,

women are facing serious problems maintaining an acceptable standard of living.

Employment Opportunities

As a result of the need for off-farm sources of income, one of the most urgent concerns for women is the scarcity of employment opportunities. The segmentation of the labour market is accentuated in rural areas and satisfying jobs for women are few. The increasing trend towards off-farm work by farm families has accelerated, however, the lack of employment opportunities is a factor of rural life. Many women find it difficult to find satisfying employment in the area of their specialisation. Being unable to find work in the field for which you are qualified can be devastating. Jan is a young farm woman brought up in a capital city. She has two university degrees and is highly qualified in her specialised field. She now finds herself in an isolated farming community with a small child, a very long way from any potential employers who might use her skills.

> '... for the first time in my life when I came down here I wished I had done nursing or teaching or something like that... which you could do in this area ... I am totally over qualified... There is really no scope for my field here unless I could get a job at X [150 kilometres away] but that is still too far to travel every day to make it economically viable.'

The lack of opportunity for employment is a constant theme for rural women. Janet, a forty year old woman, finds this particularly difficult.

> 'Really [there's] nothing available. Not for an untrained, unskilled worker unless I was prepared to go and clean houses. I can't clean my own so why am I going to go and clean somebody else's?'

Gail, who has managed to find one and a half days work as an assistant at the local school, stated:

> 'Unless you want to pick vegetables during the vegetable picking season or something you might be able to pick up a bit of that ... other than that there would be very little around here. Probably none I would say.'

Paid work in rural areas is, for many women, very fragmented. Little accommodation is made to facilitate their work. Marianne pointed out that she was forced to work four half days instead of two full days which would have saved her petrol and travelling time because there was no flexibility at her place of work. Employers take little notice of the fact that women may be travelling long distances for part-time work in rural areas and certainly no child care provisions are available.

Child care is a constant problem for rural women who wish to, or need to, work. Anna is a trained teacher with four children. She provides much of the household income with her casual teaching and, yet, the difficulties she faces in getting to work are enormous.

> '... I had an opportunity to do an eight week block of teaching straight ... but there's just no-one I could leave my child with for that length of time.... The young girls they're either too young so that you can't use them or they're at school or once they get of age they leave the district.'

Women who do work off the farm often leave very young children with their husbands because of a lack of rural child care facilities. This can cause great anxiety for women who know that farms are one of the most dangerous workplaces in this country. Many expressed the concern that they felt their husbands are less vigilant than they are. Michelle sums up the feelings of many young farm women:

> 'Yes, it worries me. I don't like them to go with (my husband) when he is working with machinery because they get busy and forget about the kids and accidents can easily happen.'

Support Services

The declining population in rural areas has had a serious effect on the delivery of support services. Many services essential to a secure way of life are closing down. Small towns are losing their banks and post offices and health services are being regionalised leaving many towns without acute and emergency hospital beds. Doctors are not attracted to rural practice because of the lack of facilities and the reduced quality of life, and consequently, much of rural Australia lacks even basic health servicing. Enhanced services such as counselling, speech pathology, physiotherapy, mammography screening may be hundreds of kilometres away at the nearest regional city.

For women who are victims of domestic violence, isolation is a factor which accentuates their trauma. Lack of support services such as crisis accomodation, the availability of guns and a lack of adequate transport facilities ensure that victims of domestic violence are very vulnerable indeed (Coorey, 1989).

The lack of adequate educational facilities is another factor affecting the lives of rural dwellers. Often rural children must leave home to gain access to tertiary education. Many women note that they themselves would benefit from access to institutions to further their own education. Several stated that they would like to study agriculture but could find no courses that would accommodate their needs.

Health Problems for Rural Dwellers

The increasing pressures on women to contribute their time and energy in income preserving or income producing activities are not without cost. Women report an increase in health problems brought about by overwork. Maureen, a thirty-five year old farm woman described how she was feeling before she took a break from full-time off-farm work.

> 'When I was working off-farm... I used to come home absolutely exhausted every day and then I would sometimes try and go up to the sheds and do a little bit up there. No, I was mentally exhausted as well as physically exhausted I think. I would come home and I would sit down and I would not probably move for sometimes half an hour!'

It is not only the women who are affected by the constant pressure to increase their workload. Many women report they are worried about their husband's health as a result of overwork. Some suggest that their husbands are withdrawing from the community and rarely leaving the farm. The crisis in agriculture is having a serious and under investigated effect on the health of rural people.

The serious financial restraint felt by many farming families can be assessed by examining the type and amount of holidays families take each year. No women in my study reported that their family takes any more than two weeks holiday per year. However, what is more alarming is that 50% stated they take no holidays at all because they cannot afford to do so(Alston, 1993). Because farm families are struggling to remain viable, they are placing their health and well-being at risk.

Chemicals in Agriculture

One of the most serious concerns reported by women is the increasing use of chemicals in agriculture. Over the last twenty years, capital intensive agricultural practices have replaced labour intensive procedures. One dramatic result has been the development of chemical controls of pests and weeds in place of the previously labour intensive control measures. Coupled with this development has been the growth of agribusiness concerns and their tightening control of agricultural inputs. Farm families find themselves victims of a 'technological imperative' or the need to continually pursue the latest innovations in order to maintain profits. Lawrence (1987:159) states that 'this technological imperative means that the farmer has climbed aboard the agribusiness treadmill becoming in the process a sort of rural 'junkie' hooked on agricultural chemicals'. All the women interviewed expressed concern for their own health and the health of family members as a result of the blanket development of chemically based agriculture. Yet the introduction of such methods is met with little opposition by family members as they strive to stay ahead of creditors. Jean, a forty-five year old farm woman described it this way:

> 'I don't like chemicals. But in today's farming they are a necessity – they absolutely are. But you know I don't like them. I don't think a lot of people do like them but they are just one of those things you have to use.'

Chemicals are used to reduce land degradation and to replace the overworking of land. However, there appears to be inadequate information available to rural dwellers about the effects of agricultural chemicals on their health. All women interviewed reported serious concerns about the health of their male family members and fears for their own health, particularly when pregnant. Meg, a sixty-four year old farm woman put it this way:

> 'When you have a son who sprays on Saturday and walks in on Sunday and says I don't feel well. Yes I am very uncomfortable.'

Carrie was another who expressed deep discomfort with the effects of chemicals on her sons.

> 'Oh it worries me a great deal particularly as the boys won't take precautions very greatly. I go to all those meetings and come home with all this information and tell them all about it and try and get them to take notice but they won't ... They are very careless and this does worry me a lot.'

Jenny was more in tune with the thoughts of the younger women who worried about the effects on their unborn children.

> 'Well it has its pluses and minuses. As far as land degradation goes, it is good because you are not over cultivating the land. But then I think everyone worries about the pesticides and herbicides you are absorbing. Obviously we absorb a lot more than people in the cities do ... I was really worried when I was pregnant.'

This concentration on chemically based agricultural production has occurred despite the private fears and concerns of most farm women and many of their husbands. It demonstrates the degree of control over agricultural production by agribusinesses and the powerlessness of farm families to escape the 'technological imperative' that is driving agricultural production.

Social Security Benefits

Rural families are also affected by the inadequacy of the social security system. Because of the assets test requirements, many farm families remain ineligible for benefits despite having little or no income. Particularly disadvantaged are rural aged ineligible for the aged pension and young people who are unable to access Austudy. Older farm women report that they and their husbands are forced to work into their old age because they retain title to their farm. In some cases, the farm had been on the market for several years and could not be sold. In other cases, son(s) and daughter(s)-in-law were now working on the farm drawing income but unable to afford to buy the farm. In many cases three generations of family, including the old couple, are reliant on the farm income, all living well below the poverty line.

Similar tests on assets prevent many young rural people securing Austudy benefits and being able to access tertiary education. Despite owning the farm, parents are unable to provide the resources needed for young people to move away from home to study. Talk of tightening the assets test on Family Allowance payments is causing a great deal of anxiety for many women in rural areas who rely heavily on this benefit.

Actions

Women in rural areas face serious problems maintaining an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families. However, chief among the constraints impacting on them are the hierarchical gender relationships which structure rural society and which act to negate their efforts and trivialise their concerns. Women's lack of visible power legitimates their secondary status. Their assigned responsibility for domestic labour, often despite their muted protests, ensures their time to pursue their own interests and issues is necessarily limited. There is much that could be done to meet the needs of rural women. Chief among these, however, is public recognition of the contribution of women to ensuring the viability of rural communities and of agriculture. In order for this to occur effectively, the way official agricultural and census data is collected needs to be changed to ensure women's contributions are adequately recorded and counted. Analysts who praise the efficiency of Australian farmers without giving due recognition to the efforts of all family members are not giving the whole picture. The persistence of family farming is enabled by the flexibility of the family structure. In particular the work of women on farms enables the continuance of family farming in its present form. If adequate retribution were made to women for their efforts the 'efficiency' of farming would be sorely tested.

To adequately address the stated concerns of rural women, a number of strategies should be adopted.

- Inequitable gender arrangements which receive so much ideological support in rural communities must be challenged. While ever women lack visible power and are expected to perform the lion's share of unpaid work in the home and in the community, they will retain their secondary status. There is a need for women to be given opportunities to achieve positions of power. In particular, local government and farmer organisations remain male dominated and do not focus on the issues facing women.

- For those who are seeking satisfying work away from the home, there is a need for governments to foster the development of employment opportunities in rural areas. Highly skilled women report their greatest anguish is the lack of opportunity to pursue work in their field of specialisation. Regional development outside metropolitan areas is an essential strategy to provide jobs for disadvantaged rural dwellers. However, there is also a need to redress the segmentation of the labour force which sees women confined to a narrow band of often low status and low paid positions. In rural areas, many jobs revolve around agricultural industries and women have not often been represented in many areas of available employment because these are seen as men's jobs. Hence there are very few female stock and station agents or bank managers. As a consequence, men with less education than women will often receive higher wages in rural areas. This segmentation needs to be challenged so that women can gain employment in traditional male occupations.

- Rural based child care services are desperately needed. Women will remain disadvantaged while ever they do not have adequate child care services. The lack of rural child care services remains one of the greatest problems for women seeking work away from home.

- Another area where swift action is needed is the area of social security entitlements. The imposition of assets based testing on pensions and other benefits indicates that the government has failed to note the effects of this policy on farm families. So many such families are living below the poverty line and are enduring enormous hardship because of this inequitous policy.

- Women's concerns about chemically based agriculture are another area where the community should take action. The cost of the commitment to the technological advancement of agriculture should be examined in human terms. Families in rural areas need to be given adequate information about the chemicals which have become so much a part of their lives. The level of disquiet among women about these practices should be acknowledged as a community concern, and the community as a whole should be part of the debate on the future direction of agriculture.

- There is a need for isolated rural dwellers to have greater access to further education. The exploration of technologies to enhance such access should be a priority for the Australian community. The needs of disadvantaged young people should be an integral part of this exploration. As well, the expressed desire for agricultural courses by women on farms should also be noted by education providers in this country.

- There is a further need to examine the effects of retracting services in rural areas to assess the impact on the community members. There is a real danger in relying on the unpaid efforts of women to fill the gaps in service provision, because these are women who are already filling in the gaps in a number of other areas. For some they are 'filling in' on farms, working in the community, performing paid work, and taking major responsibility for domestic labour. To expect that women will pick up where services left off is not realistic.

- Reports of increasing domestic violence and suicides in rural areas are a grim indicator of conditions in the bush. Adequate services for isolated families to deal with such emergencies are urgently needed. The retraction of health services to rural areas on economic grounds may be exacerbating the problems.

Rural women are making a major contribution to the continuance of a reasonable quality of life in their communities. Yet, their efforts are often trivialised because of the ideological assessment of their place in society. The secondary status of women and their resultant powerlessness has led to a lack of understanding of the breadth of their contributions and to a discounting of the issues which impact on their lives. This paper has addressed some of these issues which were voiced by farm women in southern New South Wales and has outlined possibilities for community action to help overcome some of the problems for women in rural areas.

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